

HALLOWEEN ANNIVERSARY

It had been a peaceful Halloween in my isolated Yorkshire cottage. All evening, Morgan, a grey cat, inscrutable and icily aloof even by feline standards, sat diagonally opposite me in silence, on a sofa that was manifestly too small for him.

By midnight I'd had enough of reading and placed my book on the table by my side. When I looked across at Morgan I very gradually grew uneasy. I became convinced that for the past couple of hours or so, he had not moved — not an inch. I stared hard at him, ready to detect his slightest movement, but he was perfectly, massively still. This stillness — I'm inclined to say, this rigidity — was distinctly unpleasant to behold in a cat that was sitting bolt upright.

About a year previously, Isobel, *his* mistress as well as mine, parted from me, vowing to have no more contact. She was going to sort things out with her husband. She was never at ease with the cat and urged me to take him to Yorkshire. I never warmed to this beast and to this day cannot understand what possessed me when I agreed to adopt him.

I moved slowly towards the cat but didn't dare to touch him. The thought that he might be suffering from premature rigor mortis unnerved me. When I spoke to him there was not a flicker of a reaction. When I waved my hands he saw nothing. Those eyes of purple set deep in his broad, dark grey face, were fixed on something many miles away, or frozen in very death. His tail was a dagger of stiffness.

I wanted to believe that he was in a trance but couldn't find the courage to stroke him or touch him in any way. However, I did dare to stretch my hand towards the bell round his neck, hoping that a gentle disturbance of its delicate clapper might just stir the beast without the risk of a violent reaction. The moment I touched it, I started back violently, for the bell seemed to explode into sound. I was badly shaken, and only slightly relieved when I realized that the telephone was ringing. Nobody ever rang me late in the evening, and emphatically not as late as midnight.

I snatched up the receiver. "Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?"

"It's Isobel."

"Isobel? You've frightened me nearly to death. What in God's name do you want? Why are you ringing me — and at this time of night?"

"I've just done it this very minute," she said breathlessly.

"Done it? Done it? Done what?"

"I think I've killed him."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"No, I've definitely killed him. A few minutes ago, I stabbed him. I've stabbed my husband."

"Are you drunk or something? You stabbed him? You killed him? Are you certain?"

"Yes, quite certain."

I looked towards the sofa. Morgan remained monumental.

"You see" she continued, "when he came home tonight I was waiting for him. When he came into the sitting-room, I had a heavy knife all ready and I struck him, with every ounce of my strength,

right in the heart; and he fell backwards on to the sofa, exactly as I'd planned. He's lying there now. It was a lucky strike, I suppose, but I've done it, and the police will never know, you see. My friends up here will help me get rid of the body. Everything will be sorted out. It's been well planned — the cleaning up, you know. That's enough for now. I'll be in touch. I'd better go." She hung up on me without another word.

I glanced over my shoulder at the sofa and was startled to see no sign of the cat, although there seemed to be something, some kind of stain, where he'd been sitting.

I tried to keep calm; and having at last found the number for the Lerwick police, telephoned them. The duty sergeant said that he would send constables and an ambulance round to Isobel's house without delay and that he would let me know when he had any information.

I called Morgan's name and hunted everywhere for him, everywhere except the dark cupboard under the stairs. I looked obliquely at the stain on the sofa and shuddered. What was it, exactly? Grey blood? It looked hideous. I paced up and down the room, kept staring at the telephone, and kept turning abruptly, hoping to catch sight of Morgan. It must have been an hour later that I heard his bell, loud and clear; just two rings, so loud and clear that I foolishly picked up the receiver. To my astonishment I heard a voice.

"This is Inspector Pottinger, Lerwick Police."

"Oh, thank heavens. What can you tell me? What has happened?"

"You spoke earlier to the sergeant, I think, and told him a woman had rung you, claiming that she'd just killed her husband. I'm afraid she wasn't telling you the whole truth."

"Good! Thank heavens for that. I must admit I thought she might be having me on. She was always a bit odd. Her husband is all right, then?"

"No no, he's dead."

"What? Are you . . . certain?"

"There is no doubt whatever about that."

"But . . . *she* didn't . . . kill him?"

"Oh, she certainly killed him."

"But, I thought you said that she wasn't . . . telling the whole truth."

"I can assure you, Sir, she stabbed him in the chest — one fatal blow. All straightforward enough, you might say, and yet — not entirely straightforward."

"I don't understand this, Inspector. What exactly has happened? For God's sake, tell me."

"Well, as I say, she certainly killed him, but . . . well, she didn't tell you the *whole* truth. We can be quite precise about the time of death, you know, and we can assure you that she lied in saying that she killed him about an hour ago. The truth is that she killed him a year ago, precisely a year ago today — Halloween last year. So, it sort of looks to us, Sir, as if she was . . . well, marking the anniversary . . . if you get my meaning."

(This little tale was written by Laurence of Mar specially for Shetland Library's 2008 Halloween event.)